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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern

Statement submitted by Rotary International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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Rotary International, as an international association of 29,700 clubs located in over 160 countries, encourages its member clubs to develop projects to address the needs of both men and women in their communities equally. Rotary clubs around the world frequently gather volunteers and resources to develop and implement projects in collaboration with local governmental and non-governmental organizations.

As proposed in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), many Rotary clubs have implemented projects that address one or more of the critical health needs listed in the Platform for Action, chapter IV.C, paragraphs 89-105, particularly those which improve access to basic health care (see Strategic objective C.1) and develop preventive programmes that promote women's health (see Strategic objective C.2).

The projects range from the simple provision of medicine, medical supplies or personnel to developing a complete health-care infrastructure with facilities to help meet the needs of an entire community. Each project is determined by the local Rotary club, which operates autonomously but with the guidance and support of Rotary International.

Local business and professional leaders comprise the vast network of 1.2 million volunteer Rotary club members, which is considered to be one of Rotary's most important resources. The volunteers, building foundations for strong local connections, enable Rotary to stay attuned to the needs, culture and customs of the global community. Through the worldwide network of Rotary volunteers who share the same ideals of "Service above self", it is possible for a Rotary club in one area of the world to find the technical, administrative or financial expertise needed to develop a specific type of project for its community.

In 1995, Rotary clubs in Germany and Nigeria worked together to develop solutions to a population growth dilemma in Nigeria. Club members developed child-spacing and family health investigation centres at Lere and Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria, to educate families about the benefits of spacing childbirth. In developing the project concept, organizers were keenly aware of the importance of gaining the support and

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acceptance of the men in the communities in that male-oriented culture. Without the consent and approval of the husbands, organizers assert, many women would have been unable or reluctant to learn about the concepts and benefits of child-spacing. Working with the local community (male) leaders, they developed a campaign to educate families about the benefits and necessity for child-spacing as a reproductive health issue.

Child-spacing allows time for the mother's body to heal and recover from childbirth, thereby greatly reducing the rate of maternal and infant mortality. Today, prepared with information and choices about women's health issues, men and women are making decisions together which affect the size and health of their families.

The centres were created in response to alarming statistics released by UNFPA. Nigeria's population, which exceeded 120 million, was expected to double by the year 2022 and multiply sevenfold within 75 years. With a fertility rate averaging 6.1 births per woman, it was not uncommon to find families with more than 12 children. But the most disturbing statistics showed that maternal and infant mortality significantly exceeded world norms.

Supported by grants from the Rotary Foundation and the German Government, the child-spacing and family health investigation centres supplemented conventional reproductive health-care services, which were previously provided mainly by midwives. To further educate birth attendants, nurses, doctors and other village health workers, workshops were conducted with the support of an additional Rotary Foundation matching grant. The health-care providers learned how to screen for reproductive tract cancer and disseminate information on available child-spacing methods. Following the workshop, knowledge on topics improved from 70 to 91 per cent among the more than 1,000 doctors, nurses, health-care workers, traditional birth attendants and town criers who participated.

Since 1995, participation in the centres' programmes has multiplied 10 to 15 times over, helping more than 1,300 women. As a result of the project, organizers report that child-spacing and women's health issues are no longer "concealed" topics in the cities concerned but practical matters. In addition, they have noted a significant increase in the

contraceptive prevalence rate of women of child-bearing age in the two cities — from 3 to 12 per cent at Zaria and 3 to 15 per cent at Lere.

Another key factor which has helped ensure the success and acceptance of the project was the ability of local Rotarians to work closely with civic and religious community leaders to mount the massive public awareness campaign. Midwives trained in child-spacing counselling conducted drama groups to educate and inform women in their communities. Town criers conveyed important messages and information at all public ceremonies and important occasions. The predominantly male town criers played an integral role in convincing and educating men who are heads of households and more often than not — the family decision makers.

The following excerpt from a statement adopted in 1999 by the Board of Directors on behalf of the organization's 29,700 clubs provides further evidence of the gravity with which Rotary International views the issue of health-care provision within the framework of local customs:

Rotary International encourages Rotary clubs and districts, working, as appropriate, with government agencies, non-governmental organizations and local leadership, to increase awareness and undertake even more projects that promote education on the issue of population, access to family health care and adequate nutrition, and that enable individuals, both men and women, to make informed and responsible decisions about such issues as child-spacing in a way that is in keeping with their personal values and cultural and religious considerations.